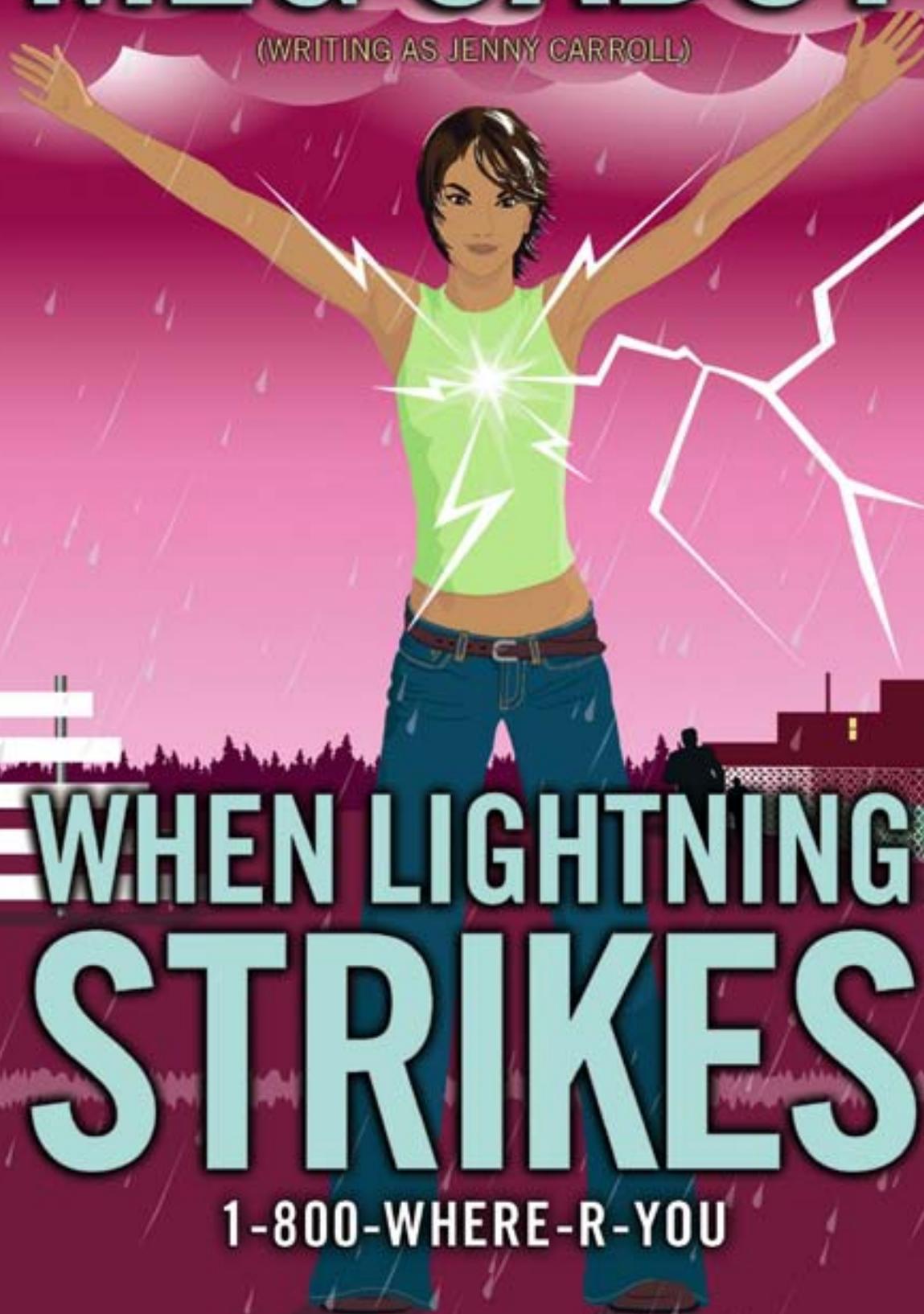


National Bestselling Author of *The Mediator*

# MEG CABOT

(WRITING AS JENNY CARROLL)



# WHEN LIGHTNING STRIKES

1-800-WHERE-R-YOU

# One

They want me to write it down. All of it. They're calling it my statement.

Right. My statement. About how it happened. From the beginning.

On TV, when people have to give a statement, there's usually someone sitting there who writes it down for them while they talk, and then all they have to do is just sign it after it's read back to them. Plus they get coffee and donuts and stuff. All I've got is a bunch of paper and this leaky pen. Not even so much as a Diet Coke.

This is just further proof that everything you see on TV is a lie.

You want my statement? Okay, here's my statement: It's all Ruth's fault.

Really. It is. It all started that afternoon in the burger-line in the cafeteria, when Jeff Day told Ruth that she was so fat, they were going to have to bury her in a piano case, just like Elvis.

Which is totally stupid, since to the best of my

knowledge, Elvis was not buried in a piano case. I don't care how fat he was when he died. I'm sure Priscilla Presley could have afforded a better casket for the King than a piano case.

And secondly, where does Jeff Day get off, saying this kind of thing to somebody, especially to my best friend?

So I did what any best friend would do, under the same circumstances. I hauled off and slugged him.

It isn't like Jeff Day doesn't deserve to get slugged, and on a daily basis. The guy is an asshole.

And it's not even like I really hurt him. Okay, yeah, he staggered back, and fell into the condiments. Big deal. There wasn't any blood. I didn't even get him in the face. He saw my fist coming, and at the last minute, he ducked, so instead of punching him in the nose, like I intended, I ended up punching him in the neck.

I highly doubt it even left a bruise.

But don't you know, a second later this big meaty paw lands on my shoulder, and Coach Albright

swings me around to face him. It turned out he was behind me and Ruth in the burger-line, buying a plate of curly fries. He'd seen the whole thing. Only not the part about Jeff telling Ruth she was going to have to be buried in a piano case. Oh, no. Just the part where I punched his star tackle in the neck.

“Let's go, little lady,” Coach Albright said. And he steered me out of the cafeteria, and upstairs, to the counselors' offices.

My guidance counselor, Mr. Goodhart, was at his desk, eating out of a brown paper bag. Before you get to feeling sorry for him, though, that brown paper bag had golden arches on it. You could smell the fries all the way down the hall. Mr. Goodhart, in the two years that I've been coming to his office, has never seemed to worry a bit about his saturated fat intake. He says he is fortunate in that his metabolism is naturally very high.

He looked up and smiled when Coach Albright said, “Goodhart,” in this scary voice.

“Why, Frank,” he said. “And Jessica! What a

pleasant surprise. Fry?”

He held out a little bucket of fries. Mr. Goodhart had mega-sized his meal.

“Thanks,” I said, and took a few.

Coach Albright didn’t take any. He went, “Girl here punched my star tackle in the neck just now.”

Mr. Goodhart looked at me disapprovingly.

“Jessica,” he said. “Is that true?”

I said, “I meant to get him in the face, but he ducked.”

Mr. Goodhart shook his head. “Jessica,” he said.

“We’ve talked about this.”

“I know,” I said, with a sigh. I have, according to Mr. Goodhart, some anger management issues.

“But I couldn’t help it. The guy’s an asshole.”

This apparently wasn’t what either Coach Albright or Mr. Goodhart wanted to hear. Mr. Goodhart rolled his eyes, but Coach Albright actually looked as if he might drop dead of a coronary right there in the guidance office.

“Okay,” Mr. Goodhart said, real fast, I guess in an effort to stop the coach’s heart from infarction.

“Okay, then. Come in and sit down, Jessica. Thank you, Frank. I’ll take care of it.”

But Coach Albright just kept standing there with his face getting redder and redder, even after I’d sat down--in my favorite chair, the orange vinyl one by the window. The coach’s fingers, thick as sausages, were all balled up into fists, like a little kid who was about to have a tantrum, and you could see this one vein throbbing in the middle of his forehead.

“She hurt his neck,” Coach Albright said. “Kid’s gotta play ball tonight with a hurt neck.”

Mr. Goodhart blinked at Coach Albright. He said, carefully, as if Coach Albright were a bomb that needed defusing, “I’m sure his neck must hurt very much. I’m quite certain that a five foot two young woman could do a lot of damage to a six foot three, two hundred pound tackle.”

“Yeah,” Coach Albright said. Coach Albright is immune to sarcasm. “He’s gonna hafta ice it.”

“I’m certain it was very traumatic for him,” Mr. Goodhart said. “And please don’t worry about

Jessica. She will be adequately chastened.”

Coach Albright apparently didn't know what either adequately or chastened meant, since he went, “I don't want her touchin' no more of my boys! Keep'er away from them!”

Mr. Goodhart put down his Quarterpounder, stood up, and walked to the door. He laid a hand on the coach's arm and said, “I'll take care of it, Frank.” Then he gently pushed Coach Albright out into the reception area, and shut the door.

“Whew,” he said, when we were alone, and sat back down to tackle his burger again.

“So,” Mr. Goodhart said, chewing. There was ketchup at the corner of his mouth. “What happened to our decision not to pick fights with people who are bigger than we are?”

I stared at the ketchup. “I didn't pick this one,” I said. “Jeff did.”

“What was it this time?” Mr. Goodhart passed me the fries again. “Your brother?”

“No,” I said. I took two fries, and put them in my mouth. “Ruth.”

“Ruth?” Mr. Goodhart took another bite of his burger. The splotch of ketchup got bigger. “What about Ruth?”

“Jeff said Ruth was so fat, they were going to have to bury her in a piano case, like Elvis.”

Mr. Goodhart swallowed. “That’s ridiculous. Elvis wasn’t buried in a piano case.”

“I know.” I shrugged. “You see why I had no choice but to hit him.”

“Well, to be honest with you, Jess, no, I can’t say that I do. The problem, you see, with you going around hitting these boys is that one of these days, they’re going to hit you back, and then you’re going to be very sorry.”

I said, “They try to hit me back all the time. But I’m too fast for them.”

“Yeah,” Mr. Goodhart said. There was still ketchup at the corner of his mouth. “But one day, you’re going to trip, or something, and then you’re going to get pounded on.”

“I don’t think so,” I said. “You see, lately I’ve taken up kick boxing.”

“Kick boxing,” Mr. Goodhart said.

“Yes,” I said. “I have a video.”

“A video,” Mr. Goodhart said. His telephone rang. He said, “Excuse me a minute, Jessica,” and answered it.

While Mr. Goodhart talked on the phone to his wife, who was apparently having a problem with their new baby, Russell, I looked out the window. There wasn't a whole lot to see out of Mr. Goodhart's window. Just the teachers' parking lot, mostly, and a lot of sky. The town I live in is pretty flat, so you can always see a lot of sky. Right then, the sky was kind of grey and overcast. Over behind the car wash across the street from the high school, you could see this layer of dark grey clouds. It was probably raining in the next county over. You couldn't tell by looking at those clouds, though, whether or not the rain would come towards us. I was thinking it probably would.

“If he doesn't want to eat,” Mr. Goodhart said, into the phone, “then don't try to force him....No, I

didn't mean to say that you were forcing him. What I meant was, maybe he just isn't hungry right now.... Yes, I know we need to get him on a schedule, but--"

The car wash was empty. No one wants to bother washing a car when it's just going to rain. But the McDonalds next door, where Mr. Goodhart had picked up his burger and fries, was packed. Only seniors are allowed to leave campus at lunchtime, and they all crowd the McDonalds, and the Pizza Hut across the street.

"Okay," Mr. Goodhart said, hanging up the phone. "Now, where were we, Jess?"

I said, "You were telling me that I need to learn to control my temper."

Mr. Goodhart nodded. "Yes," he said. "Yes, you really do, Jessica."

"Or one of these days, I'm going to get hurt."

"That is an excellent point."

"And that I should count to ten before I do anything the next time I get angry."

Mr. Goodhart nodded again, even more

enthusiastically. “Yes, that’s true, too.”

“And furthermore, if I want to learn to succeed in life, I need to understand that violence doesn’t solve anything.”

Mr. Goodhart clapped his hands together. “Exactly! You’re getting it, Jessica. You’re finally getting it.”

I stood up to go. I’d been coming to Mr.

Goodhart’s office for almost two years now, and I’d gotten a pretty solid grasp on how things worked from his end. An added plus was that, having spent so much time in the reception area outside Mr. Goodhart’s office, reading brochures while I waited to see him, I had pretty much ruled out a career in the armed services.

“Well,” I said. “I think I get it, Mr. Goodhart. Thanks a lot. I’ll try to do better next time.”

I had almost made it out the door before he stopped me. “Oh, and Jess,” he said, in his friendly way.

I looked over my shoulder at him. “Uh-huh?”

“That’ll be another week of detention,” he said,

chewing on a fry. “Tacked on to the seven weeks you already have.”

I smiled at him. “Mr. Goodhart?” I said.

“Yes, Jessica?”

“You have ketchup on your lip.”

Okay, so it wasn’t the best comeback. But hey, he hadn’t said he’d call my parents. If he’d said that, you’d have heard some pretty colorful stuff. But he hadn’t. And what’s another week of detention compared to that?

And what the hell, I have so many weeks of detention, I’ve completely given up the idea of ever having a life. It’s too bad, in fact, that detention doesn’t count as an extra-curricular activity.

Otherwise, I’d be looking real good to a lot of colleges right about now.

Not that detention is so bad, really. You just sit there for an hour. You can do your homework if you want, or you can read a magazine. You just aren’t allowed to talk. The worst part, I guess, is that you miss your bus, but who wants to ride the

bus home anyway, with the freshmen and other social rejects? Since Ruth got her driver's license, she goes mental for any excuse to drive, so I've got an automatic ride home every night. My parents haven't even figured it out yet. I told them I joined the marching band.

Good thing they have way more important things to worry about than making sure they get to one of the games, or they might have noticed a general absence of me in the flute section.

Anyway, when Ruth came to pick me up after detention that day--the day this whole thing started, the day I punched Jeff Day in the neck--she was all apologetic, since I'd basically gotten in trouble because of her.

"Oh my God, Jess," she said, when we met up at four outside the auditorium doors. There are so many people on detention at Ernest Pyle High School that they had to start putting us all in the auditorium. This is somewhat annoying to the drama club, who meet on the auditorium stage every day at three, but we are supposed to leave

them alone, and they pretty much return the favor, except when they need some of the bigger guys from the last row to move part of a set, or something.

The plus side of this is I now know the play *Our Town* by heart.

The minus side is who the hell wants to know the play *Our Town* by heart?

“Oh my God, Jess,” Ruth was gushing. “You should have seen it. Jeff was up to his elbows in condiments. After you punched him, I mean. He got mayo all over his shirt. You were so great. You totally didn’t have to, but it was so great that you did.”

“Yeah.” I said. I was pretty stoked to head home. The thing about detention is, yeah, you can get all your homework done during it, but it’s still a bit of a drag. Like school in general, pretty much. “Whatever. Let’s motor.”

But when we got out to the parking lot, Ruth’s little red Cabriolet that she had bought with her

bat mitzvah money wasn't there. I didn't want to say anything at first, since Ruth loves that car, and I sure didn't want to be the person to break it to her that it was gone, but after we'd stood there for a few seconds, with her rattling on about how great I was, and me watching all my fellow detainees climbing into their pickups or onto their motorcycles (most of the people in detention are either Grits or JDs. I am the only Townie), I was like, "Uh, Ruth. Where's your car?"

Ruth went, "Oh, I drove it home after school, then got Skip to bring me back and drop me off."

Skip is Ruth's twin brother. He bought a Trans Am with his bar mitzvah money. As if, even with a Trans Am, Skip is ever going to have a hope of getting laid.

"I thought," Ruth went on, "that it would be fun to walk home."

I looked at the clouds that earlier in the afternoon had been over the car wash. They were now almost directly overhead. I said, "Ruth. We live like two

miles away.”

Ruth said, all chipper, “Uh-huh, I know. We can burn a lot of calories if we walk fast.”

“Ruth,” I said. “It’s going to pour.”

Ruth squinted up at the sky. “No, it’s not,” she said. I looked at her like she was demented. “Ruth, yes, it is. Are you on crack?”

Ruth started to look upset. It doesn’t actually take all that much to upset Ruth. She was still upset, I could tell, over Jeff’s piano case statement. That’s why she wanted to walk home. She was hoping to lose weight. She wouldn’t, I knew, eat lunch for a week now, all because of what that asshole had said.

“I’m not on crack,” Ruth said. “I just think it’s time the two of us started trying to get into shape. Summer is coming, and I’m not spending another four months making up excuses about why I can’t go to somebody’s pool party.”

I just started laughing.

“Ruth,” I said. “Nobody ever invites us to their pool parties.”

“Speak for yourself,” Ruth said. “And walking is a

completely viable form of exercise. You can burn as many calories walking two miles as you would burn running them.”

I looked at her. “Ruth,” I said. “That’s bullshit. Who told you that?”

She said, “It is a fact. Now, are you coming?”

“I can’t believe,” I said, “that you even care what an asshole like Jeff Day has to say about anything.”

Ruth went, “I don’t care what Jeff Day says. This has nothing to do with what he said. I just think it’s time the two of us got into shape.”

I stood and looked at her some more. You should have seen her. Ruth’s been my best friend since kindergarten, which was when she and her family moved into the house next door to mine. And the funny thing is, except for the fact that she has breasts now--pretty big ones, too, way bigger than I’ll ever have, unless I get implants, which will so never happen--she looks exactly the same as she did the first day I met her: light brown curly hair, huge blue eyes behind glasses with gold wire frames, a

fairly sizable pot-belly, and an IQ of 167 (a fact she informed me of five minutes into our first game of hopscotch).

But you wouldn't have known she was in all advanced placement classes if you'd seen what she had on that day. Okay, in the first place, she was wearing black leggings, this great big EPHS sweatshirt, and jogging shoes. Not so bad, right? Wait.

She'd coupled this ensemble with sweatbands--I am not kidding--around her head and on her wrists. She also had this big bottle of water hanging in a net sling from one shoulder. I mean, you could tell she thought she looked like an Olympic athlete, but what she actually looked like was a lunatic housewife who'd just gotten Get Fit With Oprah from the Book of the Month Club, or something. While I was standing there staring at Ruth, wondering how I was going to break it to her about the sweatbands, one of the guys from detention pulled up on this completely cherried-out Indian.

May I just take this opportunity to point out that the one thing I have always wanted is a motorcycle? This one purred, too. I hate those guys who take the muffler off their bikes so they can gun it real loud while they try to jump the speed bumps in the teachers' parking lot. This guy had tuned his so it ran quiet as a kitten. Painted all black, with shiny chrome everywhere else, this was one choice bike. I mean mint.

And the guy riding it wasn't too hard on the eyes, either.

"Mastriani," he said, putting one booted foot on the curb. "Need a ride?"

If Ernest Pyle himself, famous Hoosier reporter, had risen from the grave and come up and started asking me for journalistic pointers, I would not have been more surprised than I was by this guy asking me if I wanted a ride.

I like to think I hid it pretty well, though.

I said, way calmly, "No, thanks. We're walking."

He looked up at the sky. "It's gonna pour," he said, in a tone that suggested I was a moron not to

realize this.

I cocked my head in Ruth's direction, so he'd get the message. "We're walking," I said, again.

He shrugged his shoulders under his leather jacket. "Your funeral," he said, and drove away.

I watched him go, trying not to notice how nicely his jeans hugged his perfectly contoured butt.

His butt wasn't the only thing that was perfectly contoured, either.

Oh, calm down. I'm talking about his face, okay? It was a good one, not habitually slack-jawed, like the faces of most of the boys who go to my school.

This guy's face had some intelligence in it, at least. So what if his nose looked as if it had been broken a few times?

And okay, maybe his mouth was a little crooked, and his curly dark hair was badly in need of a trim. These deficiencies were more than made up for by a pair of eyes so light blue they were really pale grey, and a set of shoulders so broad, I doubt I would have been able to see much of the road past

them in the event I ever did end up behind them on the back of that bike.

Ruth, however, did not seem to have noticed any of these highly commendable qualities. She was staring at me as if she'd caught me talking to a cannibal, or something.

“Oh my God, Jess,” she said. “Who was that?”

I said, “His name is Rob Wilkins.”

She went, “A Grit. Oh my God, Jess, that guy is a Grit. I can't believe you were even talking to him.”

Don't worry. I will explain:

There are two types of people who attend Ernest Pyle High School: The kids who come from the rural parts of the county, or the “Grits,” and the people who live in town, or the “Townies.” The Grits and Townies do not mix. Period. The Townies think they are better than the Grits because they have more money, since most of the kids who live in town have doctors or lawyers or teachers for parents. The Grits think they are better than the Townies because they know how to do stuff

the Townies don't know how to do, like fix up old motorcycles and birth calves and stuff. The Grits' parents are all factory workers or farmers.

There are subsets within these groups, like the J.D.s--juvenile delinquents--and the Jocks the popular kids, the athletes and cheerleaders--but mostly the school is divided up into Grits and Townies.

Ruth and I are Townies. Rob Wilkins, needless to say, is a Grit. And for an added bonus, I am pretty sure he is also a J.D.

But then, as Mr. Goodhart is so fond of telling me, so am I--or at least I will be, one of these days, if I don't start taking his anger-management advice more seriously.

"How do you even know that guy?" Ruth wanted to know. "He can't be in any of your classes. He is definitely not college-bound. Prison-bound, maybe," she said, with a sneer. "But he's got to be a senior, for Christ's sake."

I know. She sounds prissy, doesn't she?

She's not really. Just scared. Guys--real guys, not idiots like her brother Skip--scare Ruth. Even with

her 167 IQ, guys are something she's never been able to figure out. Ruth just can't fathom the fact that boys are just like us.

Well, with a few notable exceptions.

I said, "I met him in detention. Can we start moving, please, before the rain starts? I've got my flute, you know."

Ruth wouldn't let go of it, though.

"Would you seriously have accepted a ride from that guy? A total stranger like that? Like if I weren't here?"

I said, "I don't know."

I didn't, either. I hope you're not getting the impression that this was the first time a guy had ever asked me if I wanted a lift, or anything. I mean, I'll admit I have a tendency to be a bit free with my fists, but I'm no dog. I might be a bit on the puny side--only five two, as Mr. Goodhart is fond of reminding me--and I'm not big into make-up or clothes or anything, but believe me, I do all right for myself.

Okay, yeah, I'm no supermodel: I keep my hair short so I don't have to mess with it, and I'm fine with it being brown--you won't catch me experimenting with highlights, like some people I could mention. Brown hair goes with my brown eyes which go with my brown skin--well, at least, that's what color my skin usually ends up being by the end of the summer.

But the only reason I'm sitting at home Saturday nights is because it's either that, or hanging out with guys like Jeff Day, or Ruth's brother Skip. They're the only kind of guys my mother will let me go out with.

Yeah, you're catching on. Townies. That's right. I'm only allowed to date "college-bound boys." Read Townies.

Where was I? Oh, yeah.

So in answer to your question, no, Rob Wilkins was not the first guy who'd ever pulled up to me and asked if I wanted a ride somewhere.

But Rob Wilkins was the first guy to whom I might

have said yes.

“Yeah,” I said, to Ruth. “Probably I would have. Taken him up on his offer, I mean. If you weren’t here, and all.”

“I can’t believe you.” Ruth started walking, but let me tell you, those clouds were right behind us. Unless we went about a hundred miles an hour, there was no way we were going to beat the rain. And about the fastest Ruth goes is maybe about one mile an hour, tops. Physically fit she is not.

“I can’t believe you,” she said, again. “You can’t go around, getting on the back of Grits’ bikes. I mean, who knows where you’d end up? Dead in a cornfield, no doubt.”

Almost every girl in Indiana who disappears gets found eventually, half-naked and decomposing, in a cornfield. But then, you guys already know that, don’t you?

“You are so weird,” Ruth said. “Only you would make friends with the guys in detention.”

I kept looking over my shoulder at the clouds. They were huge, like mountains. Only unlike mountains,

they weren't stationary.

“Well,” I said. “I can't exactly help knowing them, you know. We've been sitting together for an hour every day for the past three or four months.”

“But they're Grits,” Ruth said. “My God, Jess. Do you actually talk to them?”

I said, “I don't know. I mean, we're not allowed to talk. But Miss Clemmings has to take attendance every day, so you learn people's names. You sort of can't help it.”

Ruth shook her head. “Oh my God,” she said. “My dad would kill me--kill me--if I came home on the back of some Grit's motorcycle.”

I didn't say anything. The chances of anybody asking Ruth to hop onto the back of his bike was like zero. Unless he had really good shocks, I mean. “Still,” Ruth said, after we'd walked for a little while in silence. “He was kind of cute. For a Grit, I mean. What'd he do?”

“What do you mean? To get detention?” I shrugged. “How should I know? We're not allowed

to talk.”

Let me just tell you a little bit about where we were walking. Ernest Pyle High School is located on the imaginatively named High School Road. As you might have guessed, there isn't a whole lot of stuff on High School Road except, well, the high school. There's just two lanes and a bunch of farmland. The McDonalds and the car wash and stuff were down on the Pike. We weren't walking on the Pike. No one ever walks on the Pike, since this one girl got hit walking there, last year.

So we'd made it about as far down High School Road as the football field when the rain started. Big, hard drops of rain.

“Ruth,” I said, pretty calmly, as the first drop hit me. “It'll blow over,” Ruth said.

Another drop hit me. Plus a big flash of lightning cracked the sky, and seemed to hit the water tower, a mile or so away. Then it thundered. Really loud. As loud as the jets over at Crane Military Base, when they break the sound barrier.

“Ruth,” I said, less calmly.

Ruth said, “Perhaps we should seek shelter.”

“Damned straight,” I said.

But the only shelter we saw were the metal bleachers that surround the football field. And everyone knows during a thunderstorm you’re not supposed to hide under anything metal.

That’s when the first hailstone hit me.

If you’ve ever been hit by a hailstone, you’ll know why it was Ruth and I ran under those bleachers.

And if you’ve never been hit by a hailstone, all I can say is, lucky you. These particular hailstones were about as big as golf balls. I am not exaggerating, either. They were huge. And those mothers--pardon my French--hurt.

Ruth and I stood under these bleachers, hailstones popping all around us, like we were trapped inside this really big popcorn popper. Only at least the popcorn wasn’t hitting us on the head anymore.

With the thunder and the sound of the hail hitting the metal seats above our heads, then ricocheting off them and smacking against the ground, it

was kind of hard to hear anything, but that didn't bother Ruth. She shouted, "I'm sorry."

All I said was "Ow," because a real big chunk of hail bounced off the ground and hit me in the calf. "I mean it," Ruth shouted. "I'm really, really sorry."

"Stop apologizing," I said. "It isn't your fault." At least that's what I thought then. I have since changed my mind on that. As you will note by re-reading the first few lines of this statement of mine. A big bolt of lightning lit up the sky. It broke into four or five branches. One of the branches hit the top of a corn crib I could see over the trees. Thunder sounded so loudly, it shook the bleachers.

"It is," Ruth said. She sounded like she was starting to cry. "It is my fault."

"Ruth," I said. "For God's sake, are you crying?"

"Yes," she said, with a sniffle.

"Why? It's just a stupid thunderstorm. We've been stuck in thunderstorms before." I leaned against one of the poles that held up the bleachers.

“Remember that time in the fifth grade we got stuck in that thunderstorm on the way home from your cello lesson?”

Ruth wiped her nose with the cuff of her sweatshirt. “And we had to duck for cover in your church?”

“Only you wouldn’t go in farther than the awning,” I said.

Ruth laughed through her tears. “Because I thought God would strike me dead for setting foot in a goyim house of worship.”

I was glad she was laughing, anyway. Ruth can be a pain in the butt, but she’s been my best friend since kindergarten, and you can’t exactly dump your best friend since kindergarten just because sometimes she puts on sweatbands or starts crying when it rains. Ruth is way more interesting than most of the girls who go to my school, since she reads a book a day--literally--and loves playing the cello as much as I love playing my flute, but will still watch cheesy television, in spite of her great genius.

And most times, she's funny as hell.

Now was not one of those times, however.

"Oh, God," Ruth moaned, as the wind picked up, and started whipping hailstones at us, beneath the bleachers. "This is tornado weather, isn't it?"

Southern Indiana is smack in the middle of Tornado Alley. We're number three on the list of states with the most twisters per year. I had sat out more than a few of them in my basement; Ruth, not so many, since she'd only spent the last decade in the Midwest. And they always seemed to happen around this time of year, too.

And though I didn't want to say anything to upset Ruth any more than she already was, this gave all the signs of being twister weather. The sky was a funny yellow color, the temperature warm, but the wind really cold. Plus that whacked-out hail....

Just as I was opening my mouth to tell Ruth it was probably just a little spring storm, and not to worry, she screamed, "Jess, don't--"

But I didn't hear what she said after that, because right then there was this big explosion that drowned

out everything else.

## Two

It wasn't an explosion, I figured out later. What it was was lightning, hitting the metal bleachers. Then the bolt traveled down the metal pole I was leaning against.

So I guess you could say that technically, I got hit by lightning.

It didn't hurt, though. It felt really weird, but it didn't hurt.

When I could hear again, after it happened, all I could hear was Ruth screaming. I wasn't standing in the same place I'd been a second before, either. I was standing about five feet away.

Oh, and I felt all tingly. You know when you're trying to plug something in and you're not really looking at what you're doing and you accidentally stick your finger in there instead of the plug?

That's how I felt, only about times three hundred. "Jess," Ruth was screaming. She ran up and shook

my arm. “Oh, my God, Jess, are you all right?”

I looked at her. She was still the same old Ruth. She still had on the sweatband.

But that was the start of me not being the same old Jess. That was when it started.

And it pretty much went downhill from there.

“Yeah,” I said. “I’m fine.”

And I really felt okay. I wasn’t lying, or anything. Not then. I just felt sort of tingly, and all. But it wasn’t a bad feeling. Actually, after the initial surprise of it, it kind of felt good. I felt sort of energized, you know?

“Hey,” I said, looking out past the bleachers. “Look. The hail stopped.”

“Jess,” Ruth said, shaking me some more. “You got hit by lightning. Don’t you understand? You got hit by lightning!”

I looked at her. She looked kind of funny in that headband. I started to laugh. Once, when I went to my aunt Teresa’s bridal shower, nobody was paying attention to how many glasses of pinot grigio the

waiter poured me, and I felt the same way. Like laughing. A lot.

“You better lie down,” Ruth said. “You better put your head between your knees.”

“Why?” I asked her. “So I can kiss my butt good bye?”

This cracked me up. I started laughing. It seemed hysterically funny to me.

Ruth didn't think it was so funny, though.

“No,” she said. “Because you're white as a ghost. You might pass out. I'll go try to flag down a car. We need to take you to the hospital.”

“Aw, geez,” I said. “I don't need to go to any hospital. The storm's over. Let's go.”

And I just walked out from underneath those bleachers like nothing had happened.

And really, at the time, I didn't think anything had. Happened, I mean. I felt fine. Better than fine, actually. Better than I'd felt in months. Better than I'd felt since my brother Douglas had come home from college.

Ruth chased after me, looking all concerned.

“Jess,” she said. “Really. You shouldn’t be trying to--”

“Hey,” I said. The sky had gotten much lighter, and underneath my feet, the hailstones were crunching, as if someone up there had accidentally overturned some kind of celestial ice cube tray.

“Hey, Ruth,” I said, pointing down at the hailstones. “Look. It’s like snow. Snow, in April!”

Ruth wouldn’t look at the hailstones, though. Even though she was up to the swooshes of her Nikes in them, she wouldn’t look. All she would do was look at me.

“Jessica,” she said, taking my hand. “Jessica, listen to me.” She dropped her voice so that it was almost a whisper. I could hear her fine, since the wind had died down, and all the thunder and stuff had stopped. “Jessica, I’m telling you, you’re not all right. I saw...I saw lightning come out of you.”

“Really?” I grinned at her. “Neat.”

Ruth dropped my hand, and turned away in disgust. “Fine,” she said, starting back towards the road.

“Don’t go to the hospital. Drop dead of a heart attack. See if I care.”

I followed her, kicking hailstones out of the way with my platform Pumas.

“Hey,” I said. “Too bad lightning wasn’t shooting out of me in the cafeteria today, huh? Jeff Day would’ve really been sorry, huh?”

Ruth didn’t think this was funny. She just kept walking, huffing a little because she was going so fast. But fast for Ruth is normal for me, so I didn’t have any trouble keeping up.

“Hey,” I said. “Wouldn’t it have been cool if I’d been able to shoot lightning at assembly this afternoon? You know, when Mrs. Bushey got up there, and dared us to keep off drugs? I bet that would’ve shortened that speech of hers.”

I kept up in that vein the whole way home. Ruth tried to stay mad at me, but she couldn’t. Not because I am so charming or funny or anything, but because the storm had left some really cool damage in its wake. We saw all these tree branches that

had been knocked down, and windshields that had been shattered by the hail, and a few traffic lights that had stopped working altogether. It was totally cool. A bunch of ambulances and fire engines went by, and when we finally got to the Kroger on the corner of High School Road and 1st Street, where we turned off for our houses, the KRO had been knocked out, so the sign just said, GER.

“Hey, Ruth, look,” I said. “Ger is open, but Kro is closed.”

Even Ruth had to laugh at that.

By the time we got to our houses--I mentioned we live next door to each other, right?--Ruth had gotten over being scared for me. At least, I thought she had. When I was about to run up the walk to my front porch, she heaved this real big sigh, and went, “Jessica, I really think you should say something to your mom and dad. About what happened, I mean.”

Oh, yeah. Like I was going to tell them something as lame as the fact that I had been hit by lightning. They had way more important things to worry

about.

I didn't say that, but Ruth must have read my thoughts, since the next thing she said was, "No, Jess. I mean it. You should tell them. I've read about people who've been struck by lightning the way you were. They've felt perfectly fine, just like you do, and then, wham! Heart attack."

I said, "Ruth."

"I really think you should tell them. I know how much they have on their minds, with Douglas and all. But--"

"Hey," I said. "Douglas is fine."

"I know." Ruth closed her eyes. Then she opened them again and said, "I know Douglas is fine. All right, look. Just promise me that if you start to feel...well, funny, you'll tell somebody?"

This sounded fair to me. I swore solemnly not to die of a heart attack. Then we parted on my front lawn with a mutual, "See ya."

It wasn't until I was almost all the way into the house that I realized that the dogwood tree just

off the driveway--the one that had been in full, glorious bloom that morning--was completely bare again, as if it were the middle of winter. The hail had knocked off every single leaf, and every single blossom.

They talk all the time in my English class about symbolism and stuff. Like how the withered old oak tree in Jane Eyre portends doom and all of that. So I guess you could say that if this statement of mine were a work of fiction, that dogwood tree would symbolize the fact that everything was not going to turn out hunky-dory for me.

Only of course, just like Jane, I had no idea what lay in store for me. I mean, at the time, I totally missed the symbolism of the leafless dogwood. I was just like, Wow, too bad. That tree was pretty before it got ruined by hail.

And then I went inside.